

PEET'S TRANSLATION OF THE RHIND PAPYRUS

The Rhind Mathematical Papyrus. By T. Eric Peet. Liverpool, The University Press, and London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1923. Pp. (4) + 136 + 24 plates.

In the history of mathematics the one outstanding original document of the ancient world is the so-called Ahmes Papyrus. Its importance is not due to the value of the work as a contribution to the science of mathematics, but to its value as a historical document, it being the only extensive treatise upon the subject existing in the form of a manuscript written before the beginning of the Christian era. It dates from about the middle of the second millenium before Christ and is now, with the exception of a small fragment, in the British Museum. Curiously enough, this small fragment has recently been found in the collection of the New York Historical Society, the original discoverer having apparently sold this piece separately. We have many older documents relating to mathematics, chiefly in the form of Babylonian tablets, but they are not treatises of any extent, valuable though they are as showing the symbols and tables of the Mesopotamian civilization.

The general nature of the work is well known. Eisenlohr published a German translation of it more than fifty years ago, and Professor Archibald has listed a large number of articles upon the subject, written by some seventy-five different scholars. For the present purposes, therefore, and in view of the limited space at the disposal of the reviewer, it is not proposed to speak further of the significance and the special features of the manuscript itself, but to call attention to the nature of the work done by Professor Peet.

It has long been patent, even to those who have no special training in Egyptology, that both the translation made by Professor Eisenlohr and his commentary upon it were in need of revision. Our knowledge of the history of the Egyptian people and their language and rulers has made much progress in half a century. There was therefore a need for a first-class student of history, of ancient epigraphy, of language, and of metrology who should undertake the task of translating the papyrus and of explaining its contents and its general significance. To undertake such a piece of work Professor Peet, Brunner professor of Egyptology in the University of Liverpool, an Oxford man of high standing, was unusually well qualified and he seems to have executed his mission with the thoroughness of a British scholar.